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SUBJECT: MONTREAL MUSLIMS APPRECIATE DIALOGUE WITH CONSULATE, EACH OTHER

REF: A) SECSTATE 90992 B)OTTAWA 1488

¶1. Summary. On June 2, Consulate staff (Consul General (CG), Public Affairs Officer (PAO), Consular Section Chief and FSN Public Affairs Assistant) met with ten representatives of various Muslim organizations and constituencies in Montreal, including the Algerian Cultural Center, the Islamic Community Center, the Future Movement Canada, the Egyptian Student Association and an Iraqi ex-patriot group. The meeting, arranged as a follow-up to a series of calls the CG and PAO paid on Montreal Muslim organizations and leaders in February and March, gave Post an opportunity to ascertain reaction in the Muslim community to the recent media stories on alleged Koran desecration and human rights violations by U.S. military forces. End summary.

¶2. CG Allen opened the meeting by expressing thanks for the warm welcome accorded the Consulate in our outreach effort earlier in the year, and for the communication that we have had with many of the invitees since our initial meetings. She stated that the Koran desecration stories had been very troubling, particularly the violence and deaths that had apparently resulted from the coverage in Afghanistan. She noted Secretary Rice's statement (which Montreal PD disseminated to Muslim contacts on May 16). Finally, the CG emphasized that though she and the PAO would be transferring from Montreal this summer, the Consulate would like to continue to have an open channel of communication with Muslim groups, and to possibly collaborate on program activity, including potentially bringing a speaker or nominating Muslim Montrealers to exchange programs (NOTE: PD Montreal has nominated the head of the Algerian Cultural Center for the FY 2006 International Visitor Leadership Program).

¶3. After introducing themselves -- none of these contacts seemed to know each other -- several invitees commented on the Koran desecration stories. An Iraqi Canadian said that the stories, probably all isolated incidents, had obviously been manipulated to foment anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. He said that the best way to handle such stories is for high-level USG officials to make public statements, quickly and often. But others disagreed with him, noting how often the President and the Secretary of State have already said that the war on terror is not a war on Islam. An Algerian Canadian said that though USG officials have to keep saying that the U.S. is not anti-Islamic, such statements have little effect in Muslim countries. Interestingly, Vice President of the Montreal Egyptian Student Association (the youngest invitee) suggested that the U.S. needs to engage both the younger generation of Muslims, and the Muslims who disagree with us (as an example, he named a very pro-Palestinian student group at Concordia University). Several invitees picked up on his comments, saying, "You're preaching to the choir here."

¶4. The invitees got into a long and heated discussion over whether democracy can succeed in the Arab and Muslim countries. An Algerian Canadian was skeptical, given his own country's experience. Our Iraqi Canadian contact talked about the huge desire in Iraq for democracy, demonstrated by the January election. A Lebanese Canadian chimed in, saying that Lebanon is another case of democracy taking hold. There seemed to be a consensus that Egypt is the place to watch, and the country in which the USG should focus its pressure for greater democratization in the region.

¶5. The Islamic Community Center representative (a Pakistani Canadian) talked about the need for Muslims in Montreal to recapture the respect and dignity that had been lost since 9/11 for their community. He had complained previously of difficulties faced by Muslims at border points of entry, and he noted at the meeting the stringent security procedures for entering the Consulate ("Was this security checking just for our

group, a Muslim group?"

16. All of the invitees expressed appreciation to CG Allen for the Consulate's initiative in reaching out to Muslim groups in Montreal. They would like further and increased contact and offered to assist us with program activity.

17. Montreal's Muslim communities are nothing if not diverse. Sectarian, national origin, political, linguistic, and orthodoxy differences separate the various groups and reflect different patterns of immigration to the province. According to Statistics Canada 2001 census data, some 96,000 Montrealers identified themselves as Muslims, though according to many people the actual number is much higher and growing. Because of recent immigration from the French-speaking countries of the Maghreb, Arab-Muslims comprise the majority of Muslims in Montreal (some 44,000 according to the census), but the older South Asian and Egyptian communities are also sizable.

18. In the past several weeks, Muslim organizations in Montreal have been preoccupied with two separate situations concerning Muslim integration in Quebec society: 1) the use of sharia-based arbitration in some legal situations; 2) prayer space at McGill University. A Member of the National Assembly (a Muslim woman of Moroccan origin and a long-standing Post contact), in the face of strong criticism from the imam who chairs the Muslim Council of Montreal (MCM), with whom we met last March, introduced a motion to oppose the establishment of Islamic tribunals in Quebec, a motion adopted by the three parties in the Quebec Parliament and supported by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. McGill's decision to close a prayer room that had been used by Muslim students since 1998 has been bitterly criticized by the MCM also. A Muslim Students Association spokesperson was quoted as saying, "the manner in which this was handled was very irresponsible, very juvenile, as if we were criminals." In response to media inquiries over the matter, the university communications officer's responded, "it was understood and it was explained . that this would be on a temporary basis. The university does not provide permanent prayer space to any group. McGill is a secular institution."

19. Comment: We have found much receptiveness to USG contact and collaboration in the Muslim community of Montreal, though the community itself is rather inchoate. The Consulate could play a significant role in bringing the various groups together, and getting them to think about ways the Muslim diaspora could help with democratization and development in the Muslim world, as well as issues of tolerance and immigration in North America.

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